

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your

colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for

samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

---

February 27, 2011

# Leaving Children Behind

By PAUL KRUGMAN

Will 2011 be the year of fiscal austerity? At the federal level, it's still not clear: Republicans are demanding draconian spending cuts, but we don't yet know how far they're willing to go in a showdown with President Obama. At the state and local level, however, there's no doubt about it: big spending cuts are coming.

And who will bear the brunt of these cuts? America's children.

Now, politicians — and especially, in my experience, conservative politicians — always claim to be deeply concerned about the nation's children. Back during the 2000 campaign, then-candidate George W. Bush, touting the "Texas miracle" of dramatically lower dropout rates, declared that he wanted to be the "education president." Today, advocates of big spending cuts often claim that their greatest concern is the burden of debt our children will face.

In practice, however, when advocates of lower spending get a chance to put their ideas into practice, the burden always seems to fall disproportionately on those very children they claim to hold so dear.

Consider, as a case in point, what's happening in Texas, which more and more seems to be where America's political future happens first.

Texas likes to portray itself as a model of small government, and indeed it is. Taxes are low, at least if you're in the upper part of the income distribution (taxes on the bottom 40 percent of the population are actually above the national average). Government spending is also low. And to be fair, low taxes may be one reason for the state's rapid population growth, although low housing prices are surely much more important.

But here's the thing: While low spending may sound good in the abstract, what it amounts to in practice is low spending on children, who account directly or indirectly for a large part of government outlays at the state and local level.

And in low-tax, low-spending Texas, the kids are not all right. The high school graduation rate, at just 61.3 percent, puts Texas 43rd out of 50 in state rankings. Nationally, the state ranks fifth in child poverty; it leads in the percentage of children without health insurance. And only 78 percent of Texas children are in excellent or very good health, significantly below the national average.

But wait — how can graduation rates be so low when Texas had that education miracle back when former President Bush was governor? Well, a couple of years into his presidency the truth about that miracle came out: Texas school administrators achieved low reported dropout rates the old-fashioned way — they, ahem, got the numbers wrong.

It's not a pretty picture; compassion aside, you have to wonder — and many business people in Texas do — how the state can prosper in the long run with a future work force blighted by childhood poverty, poor health and lack of education.

**But things are about to get much worse.**

**A few months ago another Texas miracle went the way of that education miracle of the 1990s. For months, Gov. Rick Perry had boasted that his “tough conservative decisions” had kept the budget in surplus while allowing the state to weather the recession unscathed. But after Mr. Perry’s re-election, reality intruded — funny how that happens — and the state is now scrambling to close a huge budget gap. (By the way, given the current efforts to blame public-sector unions for state fiscal problems, it’s worth noting that the mess in Texas was achieved with an overwhelmingly nonunion work force.)**

**So how will that gap be closed? Given the already dire condition of Texas children, you might have expected the state’s leaders to focus the pain elsewhere. In particular, you might have expected high-income Texans, who pay much less in state and local taxes than the national average, to be asked to bear at least some of the burden.**

**But you’d be wrong. Tax increases have been ruled out of consideration; the gap will be closed solely through spending cuts. Medicaid, a program that is crucial to many of the state’s children, will take the biggest hit, with the Legislature proposing a funding cut of no less than 29 percent, including a reduction in the state’s already low payments to providers — raising fears that doctors will start refusing to see Medicaid patients. And education will also face steep cuts, with school administrators talking about as many as 100,000 layoffs.**

**The really striking thing about all this isn’t the cruelty — at this point you expect that — but the shortsightedness. What’s supposed to happen when today’s neglected children become tomorrow’s work force?**

**Anyway, the next time some self-proclaimed deficit hawk tells you how much he worries about the debt we’re leaving our children, remember what’s happening in Texas, a state whose slogan**

right now might as well be “Lose the future.”

*Ross Douthat is off today.*



More in Opinion (1 of 19 articles)

OPEN

## Op-Ed Contributor: Curbing That Pesky Rude Tone

[Read More »](#)